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# THE MUSICAL TIMES, And Singing Class Circular.

NOVEMBER 1st, 1851.

## ENGLISH GLEE & MADRIGAL COMPOSERS.

No. I.

*Contributed by E. HOLMES, Author of the "Life of Mozart."*

### INTRODUCTION.

THE changed state of music of late years is denoted in nothing more clearly than by the increase of performers. Our population are making such advances in choral singing, that the natural consummation of the art would seem to be one universal voice of 'pure consent' and acclamation.

The powers of sound extend themselves into the infinite. No one has as yet had the opportunity to try what limit our human faculties require for the enjoyment and appreciation of harmony, to be placed upon the number of performers; though this, too, must be bounded, like the extreme of acute and grave in musical tones.

In every aspect of music, the wonders of its variety, and the vivacity and constancy of its pleasure, exhaust the imagination. We receive different impressions and degrees of excitement from one voice to five hundred or more; but as the sublime cannot be an habitual emotion, the voices of five hundred often heard become as one. A tremendous unison such as shook our foreign visitors at the anniversary meeting of the children in St. Paul's, last May, is the most powerful and concentrated effect of music, but it is an effect only to be produced at long intervals. In attempting to repeat the pleasure frequently, we should destroy it. The harmony of melodious parts is the best wearing, most enduring pleasure; and yet constantly fresh and new as the best compositions appear, the most beautiful of them require, in order to preserve their influence and charm, due and judicious intermission.

It must be allowed that the vast and cumbrous machinery of musical performance at the present time has some disadvantages; and the principal one is the hindrance, if not total extinction, of the artistic energy of the day in composition. Should even a poet-musician by effort arrive at the height of some 'great argument' fit for the leviathan force of our Exeter Hall orchestras, he cannot well be heard—the trial of *new* genius having become a costly and dangerous experiment; and the thing itself almost as difficult to establish as it is hard to find. We are naturally, therefore, thrown back upon our old resources, and must select our novelties from things yet unused, on which age has put the stamp and seal of authenticity.

The fine Madrigal School of England, it appears

to us, contains stores of composition highly adapted to progress and general utility in educating choirs. To the popular ear they are new; they abound in the first fresh flowers and 'sprightly runnings' of counterpoint; they are associated with the hearths and homes of old English domestic life; and are as distinguished contributions to our secular music, as at a later period the inventions of Wise, Purcell, and Blow, were to that of the cathedral. The madrigals of Bennet, Wilbye, Weelkes, Bateson, Orlando and Ellis Gibbons, &c. whatever may have been the quality of performance in the age of ruffs and trunk hose, reflect the highest honor on the early acquirements made by the English in counterpoint, and on their correct anticipations of the growing elegance of melody.

That these composers ever heard their works in any but a very shadowy and imperfect state, cannot be believed. Part-writing of such a texture as that of our best madrigals, calls into play the chief qualities of the well-trained modern chorus. It requires number and strength in each part, smoothness of voice, fine intonation, and the most expressive swelling and diminution of tone, that the cadences may represent to us, in Shakespeare's phrase, "music ever sweetest in the close." The holding up of the voice, too, at the exact pitch from the beginning to the end of a composition, without aid from an accompanying instrument, is a special acquirement, and one that must be insisted on as the test of a perfect chorus. Such powers as these, under collective control, belong to the present day—they belong to our cathedral singers, and the select chorus of our Italian operas, whose proficiency may well be emulated by all rising choirs; but how very inadequately they must have been represented at the dinner table, or social party, in the reign of Elizabeth or James, may be conjectured.

The madrigal composers were dreamers in advance of their age, and submitted to that rigid general law, which, down to our own day, forbids to the author of high and conscientious works in music any full enjoyment of them himself, or experience of their true appreciation by the public, in his lifetime. To trace the gradual decay, the conservation, and the revival of our national taste in the madrigal would form a curious episode in English musical history. All the last century these compositions were silent; and Burney seems to have had little opportunity and less inclination to examine their musical merits. He censures the poetry, of which he thinks "the blame will ultimately fall on the musical composers, who seem to have been more deficient in taste and judgment than the nation in good poets, when they set such wretched trash to music."

In the beginning of the style of choral secular music, some allowance might surely be made for

the choice of words. But after all, the madrigal composers were right. They wanted attention to music—not poetry; and selected for their purpose some harmless Arcadian picture or romantic sentiment—of no worth, or, perhaps, even nonsensical alone—to serve as a fitting vehicle for their composition. There is nothing, therefore, to divide the mind; for experience proves that the highest poetry and the highest music do not advantageously consist, because each claims the supreme place in the interest of the auditor. The madrigal singer may sometimes smile at the oddity and quaintness of the words which he has to utter; but, while they simply mark the character and costume of a period, he will find them not inappropriate or unpleasing. Altogether, the remains of our madrigal composers present themselves to the imagination like so many old English castles and baronial edifices, which having survived the storms of years in complete preservation, are now just ready to be tenanted afresh, and put to their proper use.

Nations proceed in musical improvement as in families, where the younger brood of children are continually observed to profit by observation of the elder. Without being formally taught they learn—the ear becomes true by an unmarked and insensible process of acquirement. Whole generations heretofore have died off without knowing whether God had bestowed upon them the least perception of the beauty of the confluence of sounds, and there may exist, even now, certain monsters in nature of undeveloped faculties, who do not know ‘God save the King’ from ‘Rule Britannia,’ except by the words. But the truth is undeniable, that of late years there has been a great contribution to the formation and progress of the general ear. To sing ‘out of tune’ is by no means the common failing that it used to be, and one may actually sooner find occasion for this censure in an opera singer who attempts too much, than in the ordinary performance of any well-drilled charity school. Fine female voices adapted to choral effect are abundant, and the inclination to profit by this favourable elementary condition is not wanting on the part of either teachers or pupils. Every year also adds to the number of boys who, having been chorally educated, by turns augment the most effective ranks of tenors and basses.

The foundation gradually and firmly laid, it behoves us to think of the building. The English have been reproached with their preference of foreign genius, and our musicians have even been obliged to uphold the fame of some of their countrymen in clubs and societies, till public opinion is sufficiently enlightened to relieve their care. The retrograde movement in quest of choral beauty, is really a progressive one in point of taste: at least it is so up to a cer-

tain era of harmony; we go back a hundred years for the best things of the German masters, and another hundred for the masters of those masters, and then, quite unexpectedly, we come upon the riches of our own territory, and the productions of a day, when, between the excellence of Italian and English art, the prize can hardly be adjudged.

That the fine Madrigals of our country are so little generally known, may be also excused by the fact that till the late Mr. Hawes edited the “Triumphs of Oriana,” and some other collections, not many of them were accessible in score or in parts. They are calculated for the present time, not merely by the intrinsic excellence of compositions, whose sprightly melodious counterpoint was produced in an age when the composer was not afraid of stumbling on the thoughts of another: not wholly either as a national style of music, abounding in interesting historic associations; but as vocal exercises for singing societies who desire to attain that most desirable but uncommon accomplishment—the art of singing chorally without accompaniment. For this object they are expressly constructed—their intervals are for the most part vocal and facile—they train the ear and taste for the finest changes and cadences of harmony, and they form the symmetrical mind by the closeness and ingenuity of the subject and answer in their canonical passages. Their social purposes are not merely confined to the solace of the luxurious after-dinner hours of the rich, they intersperse well in festival concerts, and enliven the character of public meetings, anniversary celebrations, &c.

The unaccompanied choir, so seldom heard in perfection, exhibits, in fact, one of the most delicate and exquisite departments of music, the effect of which is not attained by the gradations of the finest-toned cathedral organ. We remember at the first great anniversary of the Madrigal Society, under Sir John Rogers, seeing at Freemasons’ the very waiters themselves transfixed, and turned as it were into stone through the enchanting effects of the harmony. It was, indeed, the first time such a performance had been heard in London, and about a hundred of the most experienced part singers assisted at it. The powers of choral song can hardly go farther, except, perhaps, when fine voices, experience, and taste, find frequent opportunities for trial and practice to ensure the perfect success of their effects.

The English have long been admired for their skill in unaccompanied singing, even to the creating of an interest in one single voice alone. Lord Mount Edgcumb tells us that he was present one day at a house where Miss Harrop, the singer (afterwards Mrs. Joah Bates), left the company in order to entertain them with the remarkable tones

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of her voice from the staircase. A voice of fine tone that will bear to be swelled and diminished without losing its quality, is sure to prove of value in combination. Wavering, uncertain, and peculiar tones make no effect in combination; they are worse than useless to the choir, and require the noise of accompaniment to cover them. Such defects, however, are capable of correction; and it is not to be expected that each individual member of a choral body should, at the outset, be gifted with the qualities of a solo singer.

The glee, a purely English invention in part singing, affords a high test of the quality of voices and of skill in combination. Though there is a good deal of music in this school which a classical taste cannot admire, it almost all has a certain practical value, and may be usefully employed as a stepping stone to something better. Bartleman, Harrison, the Knyvetts, Mr. and Mrs. Vaughan, Mrs. Billington, &c., singers remarkable for the exquisite quality of their individual tones, their taste and judgment carried the glee to perfection at the vocal concerts in the early part of the present century. The style is still pretty well supported in private—though the unaccompanied glee for soprano, alto, tenor, and bass, sung in the old perfection, has, we believe, become somewhat of a rarity.

Grafted on these productions of ours, the modern Germans have also the part-songs of their *lieder-tafel*, for the enjoyment of a chorus of men surrounding the festive board. They are mostly things of superficial aim, with a tune in the upper part, and accompanying harmonies below; but the combination of homogeneous voices, tenors and basses alone, in four parts, is very fine, and well suited to the stirring themes they celebrate, of which love, war, Rhine wine, liberty, &c., form the staple. These part-songs serve for noisy excitement, and for national and political explosions, full as much as for music.

But in the cultivation of unaccompanied singing for ecclesiastical and other purposes, strictly classical, the Germans, though a younger musical nation, are in advance of us. The Prussian singers, who lately visited London, were a model choir formed in the highest school of Italian art, from Palestrina to Durante and Lotti. Their mode of commencing together, without any guide to the key being perceptible to the audience, appeared wonderful; but it was really more so when the violin players, who tested the accuracy of their pitch at the conclusion of their pieces by gently sounding the strings of their instruments, found them always exactly right. There really was no imperfection in that choir, save a certain peculiarity in the tones of the tenors, which is common to Germany.

Such unaccompanied choirs will introduce a new feature into the music of England, when

after a period of earnest co-operation they can be formed. The singing of the right note, and keeping in time and in tune, without dependance on the superior reading of one's neighbour, are qualities of mechanical skill, which, however, valuable, go but a slight way to the production of that expressive whole, which results, when *each* knows how *all* should sound. This uniformity of delivery is called precision in the practised orchestra. A complete choir requires as much taste and experience as an orchestra, and its education should be as soon as possible, separate and distinct. In oratorio and mass music, the accompaniments, as most of us know, 'hide a multitude of sins.' It is a higher and more artistic object to render the voices interesting, independent of extraneous aid, and to this, madrigal practice will always conduce.

#### TO CORRESPONDENTS.

Fifty-one additional Literary and Mechanics' Institutions will receive the present number of the Musical Times, and which will be continued to be forwarded to them free of charge for the use and information of the members in their news-room or library. We shall be happy to add to the list any new or rising institution of a similar kind, on learning that they are not already supplied.

Arrangements have been made to secure further efficiency in our *Brief Chronicle of the Month*, by placing that department under the care of a gentleman of experience.

A Constant Subscriber.—It will be best to consult a practical "fiddle Doctor" as to how the *A* can be best improved—we believe the sound-post may have to do with what you complain of.

Leamano, who asks the meaning of "Playing from Score," perhaps knows that a composition is said to be in *Score* where the parts are placed one under another, so that the whole appear at one view. "Playing from Score" is the extempore arrangement of all the main features by a player on the Organ or Pianoforte, where there has been no separate arrangement made for his instrument.

Subscribers who may wish to dispose of either Sir John Hawkins' *History of Music*, or Burney's *History of Music*, would confer a favour by communicating with our publisher.

Curschman.—The particulars have reached us, and are now in the hands of a friend for translation, so that we hope to give them in December.

#### Brief Chronicle of the last month.

CHelsea SACRED HARMONIC SOCIETY.—Amongst the numerous amateur musical societies which hold a place in the metropolis, the Chelsea Sacred Harmonic Society is deserving of a passing notice. It was instituted in 1847, and we have had the pleasure of being present at several of its performances. The selections of the committee have been principally made from the works of Handel and Hadyn; but they have not wholly confined themselves to the exposition of the compositions of those masters. The solos were at first entrusted to amateurs, but at a performance held on the 17th ult., (*The Creation*) professional singers were engaged: Mrs. A. Newton and Mr. Leffler having the principal music allotted to them; Mr. J. Mellings was